Identity and Irreverence
Exploring Jewish Motifs in Nat Shapiro's Art

Although Nat Shapiro was an atheist, his Jewish heritage was integral to his identity, provoking his intellectual curiosity and inspiring a significant portion of his artwork. Shapiro was especially interested in painting Judaism's lore, history, and symbols, and he interpreted them freely through the lens and imagination of a non-believer. His visually striking illustration of biblical stories prove particularly fertile ground for his skeptic's humor but also his deep contemplation of the Jewish people and their history. Shapiro's exploration of Jewish themes and motifs capture a relationship with the religion that is by turns playful, irreverent, and intensely existential.

The 20th Century Jewish-American Experience

Shapiro's parents were among the estimated 2 million Russian Jews who immigrated to the United States in the late 19th century through early 20th century to escape poverty and violent antisemitic pogroms. After meeting in New York City, his parents married and moved to the then-Jewish neighborhood of Harlem, where Shapiro was born in 1919. The family later relocated to Brooklyn, where Shapiro lived with his sister and parents until joining the Army in 1941.

Like many first-generation American Jews, Shapiro was a bridge between worlds. At home, his parents spoke Yiddish and observed Jewish traditions as they sought to assimilate, while Shapiro came of age as a born and bred New Yorker, steeped in American values and its concomitant freedoms. Far from the danger and oppression of Eastern Europe, he could choose to practice Judaism openly, but he was also free to question its religious tenets. Like many children of Russian Jewish emigrees, by adulthood he had rejected the belief system while maintaining strong cultural and intellectual ties.

Despite his atheism, Shapiro strongly identified with Jews as a people. He read extensively on Jewish history and antisemitism,[1] and contemplated the horrors of the Holocaust and its ramifications. In a 1971 letter to his niece, Shapiro wrote:

> *"Everything we had dreamed of for mankind, everything we had excused him for in his past mistakes and firmly decided to change in the future, all hopes for a new morality, and faith in the ultimate victory of mankind through an inevitable mental evolutionary process was completely, irrevocably shattered by the unimaginable barbary of the Nazis."*[2]

[1] Shapiro read the Torah, Kabbalah, and the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He explored antisemitism through French historian Léon Poliakov's *Histoire de l'antisémitisme* and Primo Levi's books on his experiences in the Auschwitz concentration camp, among others, and corresponded extensively with friends on its causes. He was well-traveled, living 23 years in Paris and visiting Eastern Europe and Israel, among other countries, where he sought out religious and historical landmarks. Interview with Mirella Shapiro, September 2022.
[2] Letter to his niece Claudia Davidson, January 23, 1971.

Together, these many influences informed Shapiro's life and found expression in his art. He became notably interested in Jewish themes during the three decades following WWII.

Painting the Hebrew Bible – the *Exodus* and *Genesis* Series

Shapiro expresses some of his strongest connections to Judaism through his interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. However, these paintings offer a visual and symbolic lexicon free from the cultural and religious constraints of Shapiro's Eastern European heritage. Art historian Samantha Baskind describes the mindset of artists of his generation:

> *"By making art based on biblical narrative, the Jew demonstrated that he was not a slave to Judaism. The creation of biblical images stands as the most secular act of the Jewish artist… The Jewish contribution to a pictorial tradition flourished in America, borne of a need to be related to one's Jewish past along with the autonomy to create such art."*[3]

Shapiro's biblical works also align with Baskind's suggestion that these Jewish artists were engaged in a kind of *midrash* – the Jewish tradition of seeking answers through extensive interpretations of biblical text. She explains that, for these artists *"[A] postmodern mentality imbues the interpreter with enormous imaginative power over a book that can never reach limits*."[4]

The Exodus Series

Shapiro produced his first biblical series between 1966 and 1967, consisting of seven black-and-white acrylic paintings on canvas illustrating the escape of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. As Shapiro creates the narrative, he uses abstract renderings of Jewish motifs and symbols to move the scenes beyond the story itself into a host of interpretations.

In *L'Adoration des faux dieux* [The Adoration of False Gods] (Fig. X), for example, Shapiro dominates the scene with a six-pointed Star of David, a meta perspective that immediately transcends the literal.[5] In the blackened center of the star, a man looks impassively down on a contorted figure, while above them another man crouches in the star's topmost triangle. Outside the star, a floating head radiates black lines. At first reading, the scene suggests God delivering his edict to Moses atop Mount Sinai, the contorted figure the golden calf worshiped by the Israelites in defiance of God and the nearby man, Moses's brother Aaron.

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[3] Samantha Baskind, *Jewish Artists and the Bible in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 177.
[4] Baskind, *Jewish Artists*, 4.
[5] The title refers to a Jewish prohibition against worshipping false gods: "Thou shalt have no other gods before on my face," (Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 5:6). In the biblical story, God gives Moses the Commandment on Mount Sinai after the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites drew God's wrath when they worshipped a golden calf.

But the prone figure appears purposefully ambiguous, suggesting a half creature, half man, a choice that invites further interpretations. For example, it might reference the Jewish people wrestling with acceptance of God's Commandments. Or, if viewed as the emergence of a man from an amorphous state, it might suggest the evolution from ignorance to knowledge and Mosaic law. Even the blackened center of the star offers multiple interpretations: the darkness of ignorance, but also the scene of an earthen burial suggesting God's impending punishment.[6] Finally, the star can be viewed as a pyramid, reflecting the escape from Egypt and the culture's influence on the freed Jews.[7]

The Genesis series

In his later series *Genesis,* painted in 1998, Shapiro created 32 canvas tiles, designed to hang in a grid. In this re-telling of the creation story, Shapiro returns to his characteristically bold abstractions, this time bringing a wittier, more whimsical mood to the interpretation.

In *The Plagues of Egypt* (Fig. X), for example, a green locust sits crossed-armed in the middle of a Star of David, like an anxious antennaed man. And in *David & Goliath* (Fig. X), Goliath looms like a chimerical beast in the foreground, wide body stripes suggesting a grinning mouth, an arm curling like an elephant's trunk. Its single eye glares malevolently at David who stands with his back to the giant, a stone in his raised hands.[8] Shapiro's choice to place David in visual balance with the giant, hip pushed out in contrapposto, evokes the boy's certainty that God is on his side. Considering Shapiro's interest in antisemitism, the scene might also make a mocking reference to Nazis and the Jewish people.[9]

Although Shapiro's interest in bible stories was concerted, it was a channel for imagination, not religious observance. As noted by Baskind,

> "*Because Judaism is a religiocultural heritage, it is essential not to analogize the Jewish 'religion' to the more one-dimensional meaning it has for Christians. Jews can make biblical art that does not believe and is not celebrating God or assisting rituals*."[10]

Other Works Reflecting a Jewish Identity

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[6] In the biblical story, God punished the newly-freed Israelites for their recalcitrance: "Your children shall wander in the desert for forty years and bear your defection until the last of your corpses has fallen in the desert," (Numbers 14:33).
[7] The Golden Calf imitated idols worshipped by the Egyptians.
[8] The story of David and Goliath is in the first book of Samuel, chapter 17; the young Israelite David downs a large, heavily-armored Philistine named Goliath with merely a stone.
[9] And possibly the irony that the Nazis considered modern art "degenerate." Ricci, Benedetta. "The Shows That Made Contemporary Art History: Nazi Censorship And The 'Degenerate Art' Exhibition of 1937." *Artland Magazine*, https://magazine.artland.com/the-shows-that-made-contemporary-art-history-the-degenerate-art-exhibition/ Accessed Feb. 2, 2023.
[10] Baskind, *Jewish Artists*, 7.

Shapiro returned to Jewish themes throughout his career, applying his characteristically cerebral and exploratory approach to these works.

In *Israel, Calligraphically I-III* (Fig. X), for example, Shapiro created three graphite works on paper, each using the Hebrew word for "Israel" as a basis for abstract expression.[11] Although Shapiro found the letters inherently beautiful, it is also possible he was aware of the historical Jewish edict against the making of "graven images" of God which resulted in a tradition of calligraphic and non-figurative art.[12] As such, Shapiro appears to engage with this edict -- literally -- by using the Hebrew letters *yud*, *sin*, *rash*, *aleph*, and *lamed*, to evoke imaginary human figures and topographies suggesting Israel's landscape.[13] As in other works incorporating Jewish motifs, Shapiro interprets Jewish tradition and tenets by stepping outside of them in a way that brings an entirely new dimension.

Moving in another direction with his painting *Menorah* (Fig. X), Shapiro interprets the candelabra central to the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, filling the canvas with orange and pink arms instead of candles. Shapiro creates an optical illusion by painting the arms to appear without beginning or end, while each candle sprouts not a flame, but a small hand reaching towards the sky.[14] In this vision, Shapiro appears to use the Menorah to express the Jewish experience of endlessly seeking light in a dark history.

An Enduring Conversation

Shapiro's art is reflective of his singular relationship with his Jewish heritage, but it is also an invitation to share in the humor, sincerity, and unbounded imagination of his interpretations. As he wrote of the *Genesis* series:

> *"I'm not sinking into late-life religious fervor, but my latest art project is illustrating the Bible, somewhat irreverently to be sure ... The interesting feature of this method* [of using a grid] *is that I count on people to remain glued to the canvasses, deciphering and trying to decipher the meaning behind the work."*[15]

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[11] The word "Israel" can refer to the nation state of Israel and separately the Jewish people. Since the biblical patriarch Jacob was given the name Israel after wrestling an angel, it is often interpreted as "wrestles with God."

[12] Interview with Mirella Shapiro, September 2022. "You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above…," (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8). Marc Michael Epstein, "Jews, Judaism, and the Visual Arts," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, eds. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 706-717. Ranana Dine, "A Religion Without Visual Art? The Rav and the Myth of Jewish Art," *The Lehrhaus*, (September 11, 2017).

[13] Compare with Shapiro's *Sinai Landscape*, an oil pastel and gouache on paper.

[14] Sometimes called impossible object art. See *Impossible Objects: A Special Type of Visual Illusion*, L.S. Penrose. https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1958.tb00634.x. M.C. Escher applied the concepts described by Penrose in such works as *Study of Regular Division of the Plane with Reptiles* (1939).

[15] Letter to Shapiro's friend Charles Abele, undated.

Throughout his career, Shapiro returned to Judaism's stories, symbols and motifs – engaging in his own unique and enduring midrash.